

01/20/21 Wednesday

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Theories That COVID-19 Originated from US Army Lab Flood Chinese Microblogging Website by [Mary F.](#)

The latest data by Worldometer shows that there are more than 97 million cases of COVID-19 worldwide and more than 2 million deaths as a result. In the US alone, there are more than 24 million cases of the novel coronavirus and more than 414,000 related deaths.

According to a recent report by the [Guardian](#), there have been revised attempts by the Chinese authorities to shift the narrative around the origin of COVID-19, with Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for China's Foreign Affairs Ministry, insinuating that the virus may have originated at a US Army lab.

"I'd like to stress that if the United States truly respects facts, it should open the biological lab at Fort Detrick, give more transparency to issues like its 200-plus overseas bio-labs, invite WHO [World Health Organization] experts to conduct origin-tracing in the United States, and respond to the concerns from the international community with real actions," Hua said.

Hua's comments are in response to a fact sheet released by the US State Department last week stating that there is [new evidence](#) that researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology became infected with the virus before the first known cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Chinese city.

"The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic," the State Department reported last week, [according to AP.](#)

"Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection," the State Department release adds.

In his statement, Hua references Fort Detrick, the US Army Medical Command installation in Frederick, Maryland. Fort Detrick was the center of a US biological weapons program from 1943 to 1969.

On the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo, the Chinese hashtag for "biological laboratory in US Fort Detrick" has been viewed more than 900 million times, the Guardian reported.

Many of the comments on the platform are promulgating conspiracy theories that the US lab could be the source of COVID-19.

China has been under scrutiny in recent weeks after blocking a team of WHO experts from entering the country to investigate COVID-19's origins.

"Today, we learned that Chinese officials have not yet finalized the necessary permissions for the team's arrival in China," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said earlier this month, [Sky News reported.](#)

"I'm very disappointed with this news, given that two members had already begun their journeys and others were not able to travel at the last minute, but had been in contact with senior Chinese officials," he added.

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Biden Signs His First Executive Orders on Inauguration Day
by [Asya Geydarova](#), [Mary F.](#)

The inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden took place on January 20 and marks the start of the four-year term of Biden as the 46th president of the United States and Kamala Harris as vice president.

Biden has already signed a series of executive orders to undo US President Donald Trump's legacy during his first day in office, signing several executive orders regarding immigration, climate change, racial equity and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I'm proud of today's executive actions," Biden said on Wednesday evening. "I'm going to start by keeping the promises I made to the American people."

Specifically, Biden has already signed executive orders to end funding for the border wall, to reverse the Muslim travel ban, to reenter the World Health Organization (WHO), to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and repeal the approval of the Keystone XL oil pipeline, AP reported. "There's no time to start like today," Biden told reporters in the Oval Office, [CNN reported](#). "I'm going to start by keeping the promises I made to the American people."

Halt on Border Wall Construction, Termination of Muslim Travel Ban

On Wednesday, Biden signed executive orders to halt the construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border and to terminate the so-called "Muslim travel ban" imposed by the Trump administration.

Trump had declared a national emergency on the southern border to divert funds for the construction of a border wall. On January 2017, the Trump administration first introduced a ban prohibiting entry of foreign nationals from seven Muslim majority countries, although court challenges forced the administration to modify the ban multiple times.

Back to the Paris Accord

"Third I'm gonna send while you're all here is the commitment I made that we're going to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord as of today," Biden said.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has also welcomed Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris accord and expressed commitment to working with Biden to overcoming climate emergency and helping countries recover from the pandemic.

"I warmly welcome President Biden's steps to re-enter the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and join the growing coalition of governments, cities, states, businesses and people taking ambitious action to confront the climate crisis," Guterres said. "I am committed to working closely with President Biden and other leaders to overcome the climate emergency, and recover better from COVID19."

Biden Rejoins WHO

The new administration also made a decision to re-engage with the WHO, after Trump announced in May that Washington was formally terminating its relationship with the organization and redirecting funding to other public health initiatives. The former US president then claimed that the body helped China conceal information about the origins of COVID-19. Guterres also welcomed Biden's decision to rejoin the WHO.

"We'll press forward with speed and urgency, for we have much to do in this winter of peril and significant possibilities — much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build and much to gain," Biden said during his inaugural address.

Back in September, WHO said its January 30 emergency declaration gave the United States sufficient time to prepare for the pandemic while Beijing has said it has been transparent about the details of the virus's origins.

Biden Revokes Permit for Keystone XL Pipeline

Overall, Biden signed 17 executive orders to undo some of the Trump administration's policies, including to halt the Keystone XL pipeline and to revoke oil and gas development on federal wildlife lands, and an executive order mandating the US public to wear a face mask and practice social distancing on federal property.

"While we welcome the President's commitment to fight climate change, we are disappointed but acknowledge the President's decision to fulfill his election campaign promise on Keystone XL", Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement.

The decision to block the controversial pipeline will come despite last-minute lobbying by Trudeau. Canada has the third-largest oil reserves in the world and the Canadian Prime Minister wants the pipeline to appease the oil industry and to avoid the alternative, which is to transport oil thousands of miles across Canada by train from the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta to the east coast.

More Than 50 Executive Actions Expected in First 10 Days of Biden in Office

In a statement Wednesday, White House press secretary in the Biden administration Jen Psaki revealed that more executive orders are in the pipeline.

"In the coming days and weeks we will be announcing additional executive actions that confront these challenges and deliver on the President-elect's promises to the American people, including revoking the ban on military service by transgender Americans, and reversing the Mexico City policy," Psaki said in a statement, [CBS News reported](#).

According to a report by the [Hill](#), is expected to take action on 53 executive items over the next 10 days.

Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States, preceded by Kamala Harris taking office as the first-ever female vice president. During his inauguration address, Biden vowed to become a leader for all and re-engage with the world in the most guarded and one of the least attended inauguration ceremonies in the country's history.

Trump and his spouse, Melania Trump, left the White House early on Wednesday for the last time during his four-year term in office, just hours ahead of Biden's inauguration. The couple broke with long-standing US tradition by skipping Biden's inauguration, and instead attending a farewell ceremony later this morning at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland before departing to Florida.

In accordance with another tradition, though, Trump left a handwritten letter to his successor. Biden described the letter as [a "very generous" one](#), but chose not to disclose the details, citing privacy concerns.

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Video: Bill Clinton Appears to Nod off During Biden's Inauguration Speech

The inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden took place on January 20. Biden is now the 46th president of the United States. Many high-profile politicians attended the inauguration, including former president Bill Clinton, who served as the 42nd president of the US from 1993 to 2001. Former President Bill Clinton appeared to be falling asleep during Wednesday's inauguration ceremony for President Joe Biden.

Video clips circulating online show Clinton's eyes drooping while Biden delivered his first presidential address.

"Bill Clinton is absolutely asleep," a male voice said in a cellphone recording of CBS News' broadcast posted by a Twitter user.

"They zooming in on Bill Clinton sleep, like he doesn't always be sleeping ... the man old," [another Twitter user posted](#).

A similar recording titled "Bill Clinton Falling Asleep at Presidential Inauguration" was also posted on YouTube.

During the ceremony, Clinton was sitting next to his wife, Hillary Clinton, near former president George W. Bush and outgoing vice president Mike Pence.

Since leaving office, Clinton has attended six inaugurations.

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'It's Time for Boldness': Biden Calls on Nation to Unite Against Challenges in First Speech as POTUS

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In his first speech after being sworn in as US President, Joe Biden called on Americans to heal the wounds of his predecessor's administration and come together as one nation.

"This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge," [Biden said, standing](#) on the steps of the US Capitol, where just weeks earlier, supporters of outgoing president Donald Trump engaged in [pitched battle](#) with police in an attempt to block Biden's election from being certified.

"Unity is the path forward. And we must meet this moment as the United States of America. If we do that, I guarantee you we will not fail," he said. "The answer is not to turn inward, to retreat into competing factions. We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus

urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts. If we show a little tolerance and humility."

The newly minted 46th president also spoke to US allies and adversaries around the globe, pledging to undo Trump's foreign policy moves, which he characterized as a step back from America's global leadership role.

"America has been tested and we have come out stronger for it. We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again ... We will lead not merely by the example of our power but by the power of our example," Biden said, loosely quoting former US President Bill Clinton's speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, where Biden was nominated as the vice presidential candidate alongside soon-to-be US President Barack Obama.

He then called for a moment of silence to remember the more than [400,000 Americans](#) who have died from COVID-19 in the last year. "We will honor them by becoming the people and the nation we can and we should be," he pledged.

"It's time for boldness, for there is so much to do, and this is certain: I promise you, we will be judged, you and I, how we resolve these cascading crises of our era."

The inauguration of Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in Washington, DC, on Wednesday has taken place under unprecedented security. More than [25,000 troops](#) have garrisoned the capital city, constructing an elaborate system of barricades and checkpoints designed to deflect or deter any of the slew of insurrectionist plots reported to have been planned against the event. Few press and fewer guests attended the event, with state flags representing the dignitaries who would have come to the inauguration.

For months after the November 3, 2020, election, Trump refused to concede his loss to Biden, claiming the results were fraudulent and that the election had been stolen from him. He and former first lady Melania Trump refused to attend the January 20 inauguration, instead [departing for Florida](#) early Wednesday morning. However, former Vice President Mike Pence, who was targeted by the pro-Trump insurrectionists that stormed the Capitol on January 6 in a bid to void the election results, [did attend](#).

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Listen: Taiwan Airliner Warns Off US Tanker Aircraft Flying Just 250 Feet Away Over South China Sea

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US has sharply increased its spy plane activity in the South China Sea in the last year, where Washington has challenged Beijing's claims of sovereignty over islands and sea lanes, making the already-busy airspace increasingly crowded.

In the skies over the South China Sea last week, a US airborne tanker came perilously close to a Taiwanese passenger airliner, passing just hundreds of feet from the aircraft.

On the morning of January 13, a US Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft flying south of Taiwan flew just 250 feet away from an EVA Air passenger flight from Taipei to Singapore. The incident was first reported by Italian aviation news aggregator [Avio Blog](#) using ADS-B data.

According to [Flight Aware](#), the EVA Air Boeing 777-300ER was flying at 36,000 feet at the time it crossed paths with the KC-135, which was flying at just 35,750 feet and using the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) transponder code PEARL50.

"ICAO rules specify that aircraft flying above FL290 [29,000 feet] are to maintain a vertical separation of 2,000ft," Avio Blog noted. These aircraft were separated by just 250 feet vertically. Audio from the encounter was recorded by air traffic control in Taipei. In the recording, a female controller can be heard telling the unidentified aircraft that it was interfering with Taipei's flight information region (FIR) "and needs to "depart immediately" and "identify yourself."

The KC-135, a modified Boeing 707 airliner, is capable of carrying up to 202,000 pounds of jet fuel. The number of people on the EVA Air flight is unknown, but it can carry up to 396 passengers.

US refueling tankers regularly fly across this region of the northern South China Sea, which sits just south of Taiwan, east of the Pearl River delta, and west of the Luzon Strait. There, they provide support for the slew of US spy aircraft that fly daily patrols. Earlier on January 13, the KC-135 in question entered the South China Sea with one such spy aircraft: an RC-135 Rivet Joint signals intelligence aircraft.

The South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a Beijing-based think tank, has meticulously recorded the activities of US spy planes in the region, noting a [pronounced uptick](#) in patrols in 2020.

This is not the first time those patrols have violated ICAO safety rules, either: [Sputnik reported](#) in September 2020 that SCSPI had caught US spy planes changing their ICAO hex codes in mid-flight from American codes to those used by aircraft from other countries, such as Malaysia. Doing so helped them to fly close to Chinese airspace without arousing suspicion, but also imperiling real civilian aircraft that might be mistaken for a US spy plane in disguise.

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Biden Makes Two Dozen Appointments to Head Federal Agencies Until Candidates Confirmed by Senate
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

For the first time in nearly a decade, the Democratic Party controls the White House and both houses of Congress, making forwarding their legislative agenda and confirming appointees much easier than it has been.

After his inauguration on Wednesday, Biden announced a slew of temporary leadership appointments to head nearly two dozen US federal agencies until his nominees to those positions are confirmed by the US Senate.

According to a White House press release, Biden appointed Dan Smith to temporarily serve as acting Secretary of State until nominee Antony Blinken is confirmed by the Senate, as well as Andy Baukol as acting Treasury Secretary, Monty Wilkinson as the Acting head of the Justice Department, and [David Norquist](#) as acting head of the Defense Department.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced the acting agency leadership across the administration to assist in the next phase of the administration to assist in the next phase of the transition of government," the release said. "These individuals, nearly all of whom are career civil servants, will temporarily lead federal agencies while Cabinet nominees continue moving through the confirmation process."

Some of the other figures given temporary appointments include [David Cohen](#) at the Central Intelligence Agency, Maria Pagan as US Trade Representative, Katy Kale at the General Services Administration, and Lora Shiao at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Just in: President Biden announces acting leadership of federal agencies across the new admin until the Senate confirms Cabinet nominees — pic.twitter.com/GrJIXoEA2d — Hugo Lowell (@hugolowell) [January 20, 2021](#)

Although Biden has hand-picked who he wants to heads the various agencies and departments, official confirmation to their positions by the US Senate, which involves hearings and interviews to vet the candidates' qualifications, could take months. According to [a 2015 report](#) by the Congressional Research Service, the average time period between nomination and a Senate confirmation vote is 71 days.

Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris were [sworn into office](#) earlier on Wednesday at a muted ceremony in Washington, DC, watched over by thousands of US troops brought in to secure the city in the aftermath of an insurrection by supporters of outgoing president Donald Trump, who claimed the election results showing Biden's victory were fraudulent.

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'Defeated, Isolated and Broken': Iran's FM Zarif, Zainab Soleimani Taunt Departing POTUS Trump
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The final days of Donald Trump's presidential administration featured combat drills by both US and Iranian forces in the Middle East, including a flyover by nuclear-capable B-52H Stratofortress bombers and an Iranian ballistic missile test that splashed down near US warships.

On Donald Trump's last day in office as US President, two Iranian figures conjured the memory of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, who commanded Iran's elite Quds Force until he was assassinated at Trump's order in January 2020.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted on Wednesday that Trump, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and other members of Trump's administration "are relegated to the dustbin of history in disgrace."

"But the memories of Gen Soleimani & the 1000s murdered, maimed & starved of food & meds by Trump's state—and economic—terrorism & crimes against humanity, will shine on," Zarif wrote, adding that "Perhaps new folks in DC have learned."

On Wednesday in the United States, US President Joe Biden was sworn into office in a heavily muted ceremony in Washington, DC. Just weeks earlier, supporters of Trump mounted an

armed insurrection and stormed the US Capitol building, dispersing Congress but failing in their objective to halt certification of the November 2020 election results that showed Biden as the winner. Unprecedented heavy security hung over the event, including miles of barricades surrounding the federal district downtown and a garrison of 25,000 troops to ward off any potential violent actions.

Biden has indicated he is willing to reverse one of Trump's most destructive acts against Iran - the 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal - and Iranian President [Hasan Rouhani](#) called on the newly minted US president to fulfill that promise. When Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal, it brought the return of destructive sanctions that have strangled Iran's economy and frustrated its efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Soleimani's daughter Zaynab also added her voice to the chorus of condemnation, writing in a Wednesday post retweeted by Zarif that she was glad to see him leave in disgrace. Trump was impeached for a second time last week, this time on charges that he incited the failed putsch at the Capitol on January 6.

"Mr. Trump, you murdered my father, the General who led the victorious war against ISIS/Al-Qaeda, with the perverse hope that you will be seen as some sort of hero," the younger Soleimani wrote. "But instead you are defeated, isolated & broken - viewed not as a hero, but one who lives in fear of foes. The irony."

Gen. Soleimani was killed by a US airstrike outside Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020, alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. In the aftermath of the attack, Trump claimed to have evidence Soleimani was planning attacks on several US embassies in the Middle East, although senior intelligence and defense [officials later said](#) his claims were doubtful at best.

The slain general was highly regarded throughout the Middle East for his leadership role in the coalition war against Daesh*, helping to organize Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian forces to reclaim territory occupied by the terrorist group, which included Iraq's second-largest city of Mosul. [In an interview](#) with RT's Afshin Rattansi last month, Soleimani said she regarded Biden and Trump as "the same guy."

"They are following the same policy, there is no difference between them," Soleimani told the host of Going Underground. "Trump ordered the killing of my father, but Biden supported that, so there's no difference."

*Daesh (also known as ISIS/ISIL/IS) is a terrorist organisation outlawed in Russia and many other states

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As Senate Adds Three New Democrats, Party Controls Legislature, Executive for First Time Since 2011

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

When Democrats last controlled the House, Senate and White House from 2009 to 2011, they were able to pass key liberal legislation, including the Affordable Care Act health insurance reform bill and the Dodd–Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act.

Three new US senators were sworn in on Wednesday, giving Democrats control over the legislature's upper chamber for the first time since 2014 and control over the White House and both houses of Congress for the first time since 2011.

While most of the federal lawmakers elected in the November 3, 2020, election [were sworn in](#) on January 3, two senators had not yet been elected: Senators Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff both triumphed in a pair of [special elections](#) held on January 5 in Georgia. Both are Democrats, and Warnock is the state's first Black senator and Ossoff the state's first Jewish senator.

A third new Democratic lawmaker joined them: [Sen. Alex Padilla](#), appointed by California Governor Gavin Newsom to fill Kamala Harris' seat now that she has been sworn in as US vice president. Padilla becomes the youngest lawmaker in the chamber at 30 years old and is the first Latino senator to represent California, which is 39% Hispanic and has more than one-quarter of all Hispanic-Americans.

Harris, who as vice president also presides over the Senate as its tie-breaking president, conducted the swearing-in ceremonies on Wednesday afternoon, just hours after her [own swearing-in](#) alongside US President Joe Biden.

Their additions to the Senate gives Democrats the [narrowest of majorities](#): in terms of lawmakers, the split is 50 senators from both the Republican and Democratic parties, but in the event of a tie-breaker, Harris is likely to come down on her party's side. When Harris is not present, the president pro tempore position will be held by Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT), the most senior Democrat in the Senate and the body's eldest lawmaker at 80 years old.

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has also become the new Senate majority leader, replacing Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), who had held the post since 2015. The position allows him to manage the Senate's agenda.

Among the new Senate's first responsibilities will be conducting the [impeachment trial](#) of former US President Donald Trump, who was charged last week by the House with inciting the January 6 insurrection against Congress. Thousands of Trump's [supporters stormed](#) the US Capitol building that day, dispersing Congress in an attempt to block the certification of the 2020 election results showing Harris and Biden as the winners. While they failed, Trump's supporters looted the Capitol building and five people died, one of whom was a US Capitol Police officer. The Senate will also be tasked with confirming Biden's many nominees to fill federal offices, including the heads of various departments and agencies. Earlier on Wednesday, [Biden appointed](#) several temporary agency heads until his nominees are confirmed, which could take months.

In the November election, Democrats also retained their control of the US House of Representatives, although they lost 11 seats in the 435-person body.

US Senate Confirms Avril Haines as Biden's Director of National Intelligence

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23:51 GMT 20.01.2021(updated 00:41 GMT 21.01.2021) Get short URL

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

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US President Joe Biden's new administration is expected to soon declassify and release key documents related to the 2018 murder of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi by agents of the Saudi monarchy.

Just hours after the beginning of Biden's administration, the Senate voted to confirm Haines as Director of National Intelligence (DNI).

A former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Haines has also served as Deputy Counsel to the President for National Security Affairs, both of which she performed under former US President Barack Obama. She is the [first woman](#) to become DNI, a Cabinet-level position created in 2004 to oversee the National Intelligence Program and the United States' 17 different intelligence agencies.

Just a few hours earlier, Biden [temporarily appointed](#) Lora Shiao to head the office of the DNI until Haines could be confirmed or rejected by the Senate.

In her capacity on the National Security Council, Haines worked closely with agency director John Brennan to construct the legal framework underpinning the Obama administration's policy on extrajudicial drone strikes. Former CIA agent-turned whistleblower John Kiriakou [told Democracy Now!](#) that Haines needs to explain "what her role was exactly in the redaction of the Senate Intelligence Committee's torture report," which was never released except for a heavily redacted executive summary published in 2014.

Haines has also been criticized for her consulting work with Palantir, a data mining company that helped US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to [track down](#) undocumented immigrants during the administration of former US President Donald Trump.

Questions have also been raised about her employment at [WestExec Advisors](#), a secretive consulting firm believed to provide services to Pentagon contractors that was founded by [Antony Blinken](#), Biden's nominee to be US Secretary of State, and [Michele Flournoy](#), who Biden seriously considered as his nominee for US Secretary of Defense.

Haines said earlier this week during her confirmation hearing that soon after becoming president, Biden would declassify an intelligence dossier on [Khashoggi's October 2018 murder](#) at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. She told Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR) her office would "absolutely" release an unclassified report on who was behind the murder.

The outgoing Trump administration repeatedly demurred when it came to assigning responsibility for Khashoggi's death, but the [Washington Post](#) reported in late 2018 that the CIA was ready to point the finger at Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the power behind the Saudi throne, but Trump was afraid to alienate Riyadh amid his administration's "maximum pressure" push against Iran. A [separate probe](#) by the Saudi government led to the trials and executions of five persons and a sweeping round of firings of high-level Saudi officials in 2019, but found the killing was carried out by rogue elements in the Saudi government, not at the Crown Prince's direction.

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New Presidency, Same Sides: How Fox News, CNN, MSNBC Covered the Biden Inauguration

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. and Kamala Devi Harris were sworn in to office as US President and Vice President Wednesday morning, marking then end of now-former US President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence's tenure in office.

While Biden's inauguration was broadcast across MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN on Wednesday, the three networks and their talking heads took different approaches in their coverage and commentary.

Fox News

The Fox News Channel took a [very comparative](#) and more critical approach to Biden's inauguration than its competitors, highlighting the administration transition from Republican to Democrat control.

The outlet also echoed right-wing calls for Biden to act with "humility" in moving forward with new legislation - a lot of which would undo past orders imposed by 45.

However, some netizens remarked that the news outlet's inauguration commentary was arguably questionable.

"Fox News Sunday" anchor Chris Wallace told Sandra Smith that Biden's first presidential speech to the American people was "the best inaugural address I've ever heard."

The famed journalist was also caught mocking senior political analyst [Brit Hume](#), who, in addressing Biden's remarks, appeared to say that the presence of COVID-19 vaccines somehow make up for the real-time death toll and hospitalizations caused by the novel disease.

"Everybody wants to say that the COVID crisis is getting worse, and certainly the numbers suggest that, but we have a vaccine. And we believe and have every reason to believe it works," Hume said after anchor Martha MacCallum remarked that Biden has accepted "an enormous mantle of responsibility."

"There's some serious distribution issues that I suspect will be fairly quickly resolved. And that is what we've hoped for from the beginning, that there would be a vaccine," Hume added.

Moments later, the broadcast audio sounded like it was losing its signal and Wallace could be overheard remarking about "100,000 people dying." Many took the hot mic moment to be a rebuke of his coworker's statement.

According to the Johns Hopkins University [COVID-19 dashboard](#), the US has logged more than 24 million cases of the novel coronavirus and over 404,000 related deaths.

CNN

CNN's discussion of the inauguration generally included a rather optimistic tone on the incoming administration.

John Harwood, CNN's new White House correspondent, received quite the welcome to his [new role](#) after tweeting his views on the transition from Trump's administration to that of Biden's. Harwood, a former journalist with CNBC and the New York Times, notably [popped up](#) in the WikiLeaks dump of John [Podesta's emails](#).

This poetic approach has been a common theme for the network's talking heads. Tuesday night, CNN political director received a side-eye from journalist Glenn Greenwald and tens of thousands of netizens after he likened the National Mall lights to Biden's "arms embracing America."

In the hours between Trump's departure and Biden's arrival, CNN took an apparent swipe at 45, publishing an article highlighting Trump's decision to break with tradition and not attend the inauguration of his successor.

April Ryan, White House Correspondent for The Grio, tweeted the article's allegation about Melania and Donald Trump sleeping in separate beds.

MSNBC

Lastly, MSNBC's inauguration coverage was similar to that of CNN, with a pro-Biden tone that spoke to the ushering in of a new era based on "truth."

At one point, MSNBC chief anchor Brian Williams, who was notoriously sacked from NBC in 2015 over false reporting, argued that "it's gonna be a shock to witness a fact-based White House briefing in that briefing room."

Williams' comments came before the first press conference was even held.

John Brennan, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, joined MSNBC on Wednesday and argued that based on his experience in government, he believes Biden's intelligence community will be working to squash a "pro-Trump insurgency" that is allegedly brewing and that, according to him, [harbors "even libertarians"](#).

"Does John Brennan know what a [libertarian](#) is?" [tweeted](#) "The View" co-host Meghan McCain, who is married to libertarian Ben Domenech, co-founder and publisher of The Federalist.

MSNBC, CNN Positioned to Benefit from Biden Presidency

Fox News was reportedly given almost exclusive access to Trump when it came to mainstream interviews.

According to former CBS News White House Correspondent [Mark Knoller](#), Fox News was granted at least 113 interviews from the US president over the past four years, while NBC/CNBC were allowed to interview Trump only eight times.

CNN never received interviews from the former president, though it is unclear how many requests were issued by the network. Biden, however, is likely to receive a lot of media requests from MSNBC and CNN.

Interestingly enough, Biden's Wednesday swearing comes amid CNN and MSNBC's celebration of their first ratings win over the Fox News Channel for the first time in two decades.

Citing Nielsen, [Forbes reported](#) earlier this week that, for the week of January 4 through January 10, CNN and MSNBC averaged around 2.8 million and 2.3 million viewers per day, respectively.

Fox News news averaged 1.7 million watchers, continuing its decline since election day.

According to Mediate, Fox News Channel [has trailed](#) in the key 25-54 age demographic since the November election.

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Broken Traditions: How Biden-Harris Inauguration Compared to Past US Ceremonies
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

From newly imposed COVID-19 protocols to now-former US President Donald Trump departing the White House without attending the historic inauguration ceremony, the transfer of power between the two presidents was far from the picture of your run-of-the-mill presidential customs. Despite repeated attempts by Trump and his supporters to prevent US President Joe Biden from taking office, the Pennsylvania-born official was undeterred as he took the presidential oath at the US Capitol and ultimately became the 46th president of the United States. However, as both Biden and US Vice President Kamala Harris took their oaths, no one could deny the Wednesday event was the polar opposite of past ceremonies, as the nation's capital remained under lockdown over the possibility of domestic terrorism acts or threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Prompts Limited Inauguration Attendees

With the COVID-19 pandemic still in full swing, plans for a traditional inauguration ceremony for the incoming Biden administration were immediately thrown out the window, with officials promptly working up plans for formalities that stayed in line with measures meant to curb the spread of the deadly respiratory disease.

While typical Inauguration Day festivities would see thousands lined along Pennsylvania Avenue and hundreds of thousands of more Americans filling the National Mall to bear witness, the Biden-Harris inauguration was instead limited to a crowd size of about 1,000 individuals, who had to adhere to masking and social distancing efforts.

Instead of the large crowds, the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies (JCCIC), which is in charge of planning the day's festivities, organized an extensive flag display across the National Mall that included an estimated 191,500 US flags and 56 pillars of light to represent the US and its territories as a whole.

As traditional luncheons and inaugural balls held after the ceremony have also been canceled, the organizing committee replaced them with three virtual balls, with one of them being dubbed "We Are One." Additionally, the day will also include the first virtual inaugural parade to include individuals from all US states and territories.

Acknowledging the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the US, Biden and Harris both attended a tribute at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool late Tuesday to honor the more than 400,000 Americans who died after contracting SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Reminders of Capitol Insurrection

Exactly two weeks after the deadly Capitol insurrection that attempted to stop lawmakers from certifying Biden's presidential win, signs of the fruitless siege were hard to miss, even more so as federal authorities doubled down on security measures over concerns of another attack on the building.

Riddled across the National Mall, spectators who were present at the ceremony were surrounded by 12-foot-high fences that were topped with barbed wire and backed by concrete barrier blocks, in addition to the usual street closures the inauguration prompts.

Thousands of National Guard troops were also stationed across the area and lined along the route Biden and company took to before participating in the wreath laying at Arlington National Cemetery.

The presence of Eugene Goodman, a Capitol Police officer who was [recorded drawing](#) the mob of Trump loyalists away from the Senate chamber on January 6, also served as a reminder of the events that took place at the Capitol.

As the acting deputy Senate sergeant-at-arms, Goodman was part of the official escort that accompanied Harris to the platform that was erected ahead of the ceremony. A [loud applause](#) broke out when Goodman was seen standing at the arch entryway at the Capitol.

Ahead of the inauguration, security measures were significantly bolstered after federal authorities discovered a multitude of online posts that suggested armed protests would be held across the nation at government buildings, including the US Capitol. Last week, FBI Director Christopher Wray [indicated officials](#) had detected an “extensive” trove of posts, but that investigators would be working nonstop to monitor any potential threats.

Former Presidents, Musical Guests & Missing Officials

Although the number of attendees was drastically cut, the group of individuals who made the list stayed largely in line with those who are traditionally spotted at an inauguration.

The ceremony was opened by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and followed by Sen. Roy Blunt (R-MO), who serves as the chairman of the JCCIC and who then introduced Father Leo J. O'Donovan III for the invocation. The inaugural baton was later picked up by Andrea Hall, a Georgia fire captain who led the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman and Rev. Doctor Silvester Beaman for the delivery of the benediction.

The vice-presidential oath of office was administered by Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor, whereas Chief Justice John Roberts conducted the presidential oath of office. All but three of the Supreme Court justices were present at the ceremony. Justices Stephen Breyer, Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito skipped the event in light of [the pandemic](#).

Musical guests at the event included Lady Gaga, who sang her rendition of “[The Star-Spangled Banner](#),” and cowboy-hat-wearing Garth Brooks, who belted out a bare-bones cover of “[Amazing Grace](#).” Jennifer Lopez, who was the second musical guest to appear, offered [a medley](#) of “This is Your Land” and “America the Beautiful” that included a reference to her 1999 hit song “Let’s Get Loud.”

Among the former White House commander-in-chiefs, former US Presidents Barack Obama, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were in attendance, along with former first ladies Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush.

Aside from Trump, Jimmy Carter, who is the oldest living former US President, did not attend the inaugural festivities, marking the first inauguration the official failed to attend in person since 1977. According to the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), Carter last traveled to the nation’s capital for an official event in 2018 - for the funeral of former US President George H.W. Bush.

Opting to not attend Trump’s send-off earlier in the day, former Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen were present at the inauguration. Congressional officials including House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) were in attendance.

Also at the event were the relatives of Black Americans who died from police violence. Families of Jacob Blake and Breonna Taylor were present and hoped that their trip to Washington, DC, would help the incoming administration to double down on police reform and racial justice, [the New York Times reported](#).

Biden Will Be ‘President for All Americans’

Moments after being sworn in as the next US president, [Biden called](#) on Americans across the nation to come together instead of deciding to “retreat into competing factions.”

"We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this if we open our souls instead of hardening our hearts. If we show a little tolerance and humility," he said in his first speech as president before pledging to right his predecessor's wrongs.

"America has been tested and we have come out stronger for it. We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again ... We will lead not merely by the example of our power but by the power of our example."

"It's time for boldness, for there is so much to do, and this is certain: I promise you, we will be judged, you and I, how we resolve these cascading crises of our era," he said. Biden also stressed that he would be the "president for all Americans."

Biden, who had unsuccessful presidential bids in 1988 and in 2008, took the presidential oath on Wednesday on a 5-inch thick Bible that has been in his family since 1893. The president [previously told](#) late-night host Stephen Colbert in December that "every time I've been sworn in for anything, the date has been on that and is inscribed on the Bible."

Since the ceremony, Biden has announced multiple temporary [leadership appointments](#) to nearly two dozen US federal agencies.

Trump Pledges Political Comeback at Send-Off

Shortly before the inauguration, Trump clarified on his since-suspended Twitter account that he would not be attending the Biden-Harris swearing-in, adding him to the list of the [few American presidents](#) who have opted not to attend the symbolic event.

In a brief [farewell speech](#) given at Joint Base Andrews, Trump told the group of individuals in attendance that his administration "accomplished a lot" during the last four years, stressing that "what we've done has been amazing by any standard."

Going off script, Trump remarked that the incoming Biden administration had the "foundation to do something really spectacular," before remarking that he hoped "they don't raise your taxes." In closing remarks, Trump vowed to "be back in some form."

Although Trump did break from inaugural traditions, he did manage to commit to one aspect: [leaving a note](#) to his successor. It's unclear what message the letter contains.

Since leaving the White House, Trump has relocated to Mar-a-Lago, his resort in Palm Beach, Florida, that the former president has deemed his new place of residence.

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US Never Showed Any Proof of Russian Involvement in SolarWinds Hack - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is using the media to spread different versions of what caused the SolarWinds cyberattack, but it never showed any proof that Russia was complicit in it, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik. US intelligence agencies said in early January that Russia was likely behind a mass cyberattack on US tech companies and government agencies. The attackers used IT management software SolarWinds to gain access. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has refuted claims that Russia was behind the cyberattack.

"The United States is continuing its 'loudspeaker diplomacy' — spreading versions of events through the media, but not showing any proof," the diplomat said.

Russia has repeatedly invited Washington to regularly exchange information on cyberattacks and information security.

"Our proposals were met with silence. The [US] administration is not using the suggested channels for dialogue on expert level," Antonov said.

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Russia Ready to Work With US to Counter Pandemic, Including Developing Treatment - Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is prepared to work with the United States on fighting the ongoing pandemic, including on development of treatment against COVID-19, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We are open to further cooperation with the United States to combat the pandemic, including in areas such as the development of effective treatment for the infection," Antonov stated.

Antonov noted that on July 30, 2020 the US National Academy of Sciences, Technology, and Medicine and the Russian Academy of Sciences signed a joint protocol on cooperation in various fields of research related to COVID-19.

"As for the vaccine, the situation turned out to be more complicated. Some people in America tried to make this about politics," he went on to say. "Washington is openly skeptical about our achievements. I mean Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona. False information about Russian vaccines being ineffective and unsafe is being spread. However, the scientific community rates the Russian advances highly."

Sputnik V is the world's first vaccine against COVID-19, it was developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology and registered by the Russian Health Ministry on August 11. The vaccine shows an efficacy of 91.4 percent and at 100 percent against severe cases.

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Russia Ready to Work With Biden Administration on Intermediate-Range Weapons - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to work with the administration of President Joe Biden on intermediate-range weapons, following the dismantlement of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

The US announced its plans to leave the INF Treaty in 2018 and formally pulled out in 2019.

"Our initiatives are still on the table. If the new administration is interested in looking for mutually acceptable solutions regarding the intermediate-range weapons, we are ready to work on that," the diplomat said.

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Russia, US Never Stopped Cooperation on Afghanistan - Antonov

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia and the United States have never stopped working together on Afghanistan, and the special envoys of the two countries are in close contact, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

The ambassador slammed the June article by the New York Times newspaper, which reported, citing sources, that Russia allegedly offered militants in Afghanistan bounties for killing US troops stationed there. Then-US President Donald Trump dismissed the claims. Russian officials strongly rejected the allegations.

"The representatives of the administration at various levels have repeatedly confirmed that there is no proof that there are any threats to US troops in Afghanistan from Russia," Antonov said.

"Moreover, our countries never stopped cooperating on Afghanistan. Our special envoys are in close contact. We hope that this work will continue under the new administration in the interest of peace in Afghanistan."

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Russia Invites US to Hold 2+2 Talks Among Foreign, Defense Chiefs - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia's proposal to the United States to hold talks among foreign and defense ministers in a 2+2 format still stands, even after Moscow's repeated invitations have gone unanswered, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"As for the 2+2 format, we have repeatedly invited the United States to resume it. However, we never got any positive reply. This initiative is still on the table," the envoyt said.

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Russia Hopes to Resume Talks With US on Counterterrorism After COVID Threat Over - Envoy

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia and the United States did not have any contacts on counterterrorism in 2020 but Moscow hopes to resume cooperation once the coronavirus threat weakens, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"In October 2019, we invited Americans to consider arranging new consultations in late January 2020. In principle, our partners did not refuse. However, there were no contacts on counterterrorism in 2020. We hope that as the situation with the pandemic improves, this dialogue can be resumed," the ambassador said.

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REVIEW - Biden on Day 1 Takes 'Bold Action' to Dismantle Trump's Signature Policies

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden shortly after being inaugurated signed a flurry of executive orders designed to reverse several of his predecessor's key environmental, security and immigration policies.

Washington was on virtual lockdown ahead of and during the inauguration festivities amid fears of violence stemming from the January 6 assault on the Capitol by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump. The protesters, after a fiery speech from Trump, had tried to prevent Congress from certifying Biden's victory. Trump was impeached last week for allegedly inciting the "insurrection" and the pending senate trial threatens to overshadow the beginning of Biden's term.

INAUGURATION UNDER HIGH ALERT

Some 25,000 National Guard soldiers were mobilized to the nation's capital to boost security during the inauguration. In addition, multilayered fences were erected and scores of metro stations, roads and bridges closed for what was the lowest attended inauguration in US history due to the pandemic and security fears from the Capitol riots.

Judy Grear, who traveled all the way from California's Santa Catalina island, told Sputnik she came to see history in the making but was disappointed with the harsh restrictions.

"It is really sad that it has to be all online and all virtual. It seems that there are so many things that are taken away because of this insurrection and riot," Grear said as she tried to catch a glimpse of Biden's motorcade from behind the backs of police on Wednesday.

Biden was sworn into office at around noon EST (17:00 GMT) in a ceremony administered by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts outside the US Capitol building. The 78-year-old Democratic Party veteran took the oath with his hand on top of a 127-year-old, five-inch-thick family Bible, with his wife Jill and son Hunter standing by his side. Biden's swearing-in came right after Kamala Harris took the oath as the country's first female vice president.

Bind in his inaugural address vowed to bring the country together in order to defeat the virus along with political extremism, white supremacy and domestic terrorism.

"We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this," Biden said during the address.

In addition to fixing damage at home, the former Obama administration vice president said he also aims to repair US alliances and "engage with the world once again."

Biden and Harris then conducted a ceremonial review of troops before heading to Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, where the president laid a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

SWIFT, IMMEDIATE ACTION

As he made his way to the White House, the new president said "there is no time to waste" in order to tackle the crises the country faced.

"That's why today, I am heading to the Oval Office to get right to work delivering bold action," Biden said via Twitter.

And bold action he took. Biden signed fifteen executive orders on Wednesday tops amongst which called for halting construction of the border wall, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, rescinding the Keystone XL pipeline permit, along with terminating the so-called Muslim travel ban.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that he welcomes Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and remains committed to cooperating to overcome the climate emergency and recover from the coronavirus pandemic. UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Guterres also welcomed US "re-engagement" with the WHO and supporting the COVAX Facility, a global vaccine initiative.

"With vaccines being a critical tool in the battle against COVID-19, the United States joining and supporting the COVAX facility will give momentum to efforts to ensure equitable access to vaccines for all countries," Dujarric said in a statement on Wednesday.

The White House said US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci will participate in a WHO meeting on Thursday.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in a statement said he was disappointed in Biden's decision to reject the permit for the construction of the 1,700-mile Keystone XL pipeline, which is designed to transfer oil from Alberta to the US state of Nebraska.

Other major orders included a covid mask mandate for federal workers and the launch of an initiative to address racial inequalities in government.

The White House said the president also submitted new immigration legislation to Congress, both houses of which are now controlled by Biden's Democratic Party after flipping the Senate in the 2020 election.

US-RUSSIA PROSPECTS

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik that while no contacts have yet been made with the new administration, Russian diplomats were familiar with many of Biden's nominees for top jobs.

The ambassador said he looks forward to beginning substantive talks with Biden's teams especially on renewing the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START).

"Russia is open for a substantive dialogue on the New START. There are still chances to reach this agreement before the treaty expires on February 5, 2021. The ball is in Washington's court, we are waiting for constructive proposals," Antonov said.

Antonov also said Russia would like to work with the US on issues such as rebuilding Syria and hopes Washington studies Moscow's idea to hold a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

"It would be useful to find areas where Russia and the US could cooperate. For instance, on humanitarian aid, post-conflict rebuilding, de-mining, helping refugees and internally displaced persons return, and counterterrorism. We are ready for such cooperation — on condition that Syria's sovereignty is respected," the ambassador said.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki later in the evening told reporters there was nothing to announce yet in terms of a call between Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. She said

Biden's first telephone call with a foreign leader is scheduled for Friday with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Psaki said she expects Biden's decision on the Keystone pipeline to be one of the topics discussed.

TRUMP VOWS TO RETURN

Conspicuously absent from the inauguration ceremony was Trump, who left for his Mar-a-Lago golf club in Palm Beach on Wednesday morning. He became the first president to skip his successor's inauguration since 1879. Biden did say that Trump left him a "generous letter."

"What we've done has been amazing by any standard. We rebuilt the United States military, we created a new force, called the Space Force - that in itself would be a major achievement for a regular administration. We were not a regular administration," Trump told reporters.

Trump also wished the Biden administration "great luck and great success."

"I think they'll have great success, they have the foundation to do something, really spectacular," Trump said. "So, just a good bye. We love you. We will be back in some form... Have a good life, we will see you soon."

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Russian Diplomats Intend to Establish Regular Contacts With White House - Antonov
WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russian diplomats intend to establish regular contacts with the incoming White House apparatus, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We intend to establish a regular dialogue with our US colleagues in the White House," the ambassador said.

"Many of the high-ranking officials are familiar to us from the Obama administration. For example, we had discussions with Brett McGurk, who is expected to take over the role of coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa at the National Security Council, during his tenure as special envoy to the global coalition to counter the Islamic State (terrorist group, banned in Russia)," he added.

Antonov noted that the new team should be given time to decide on foreign policy priorities and approaches, and its international course should be judged based on actions and not pre-election rhetoric.

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Moscow Expects No Big Changes in US Policy on Russia Under Biden - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Moscow does not expect any big changes in the US policy regarding Russia under the new administration and believes that containing Russia will remain high on the agenda, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We do not have any unrealistically positive expectations. Even if there are some changes regarding Russia, it will be about details rather than the essence. Systemic containment of Russia will remain a very important part of the US politics," the ambassador said.

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Russia Ready to Work With US on Syria - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to work with the United States on post-conflict rebuilding, de-mining and counterterrorism in Syria, as long as the country's sovereignty is respected, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We assume that our troops in Syria will remain in contact to prevent any incidents. In addition, it would be useful to find areas where Russia and the US could cooperate. For instance, on humanitarian aid, post-conflict rebuilding, de-mining, helping refugees and internally displaced persons return, and counterterrorism. We are ready for such cooperation — on condition that Syria's sovereignty is respected," the ambassador said.

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Biden's First Foreign Leader Call Set for Friday With Canada's Trudeau - White House

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's first telephone call with a foreign leader is scheduled on Friday with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in a press briefing.

"His first call - foreign leader call - will be on Friday with Prime Minister Trudeau, I expect they will certainly discuss the important relationship with Canada as well as his decision on the Keystone pipeline that we announced today," Psaki said.

Earlier, Trudeau in a statement said he was "disappointed" with Biden's decision to scrap the Keystone XL pipeline project. The pipeline was designed to take crude oil 1,700 miles from Canada's Alberta to the US state of Nebraska to join an existing pipeline.

Psaki added that there are currently no plans to announce a call between Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin. She said Biden's first foreign leader calls will be with US partners and allies.

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US Health Official Fauci to Participate in WHO Meeting on Thursday - White House

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci will participate in the World Health Organization's (WHO) meeting on Thursday, a day after newly inaugurated US President Joe Biden rejoined the organization, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters.

"Tomorrow... Dr. Fauci will participate remotely in the meeting of the World Health Organization as the US head of delegation," Psaki said on Wednesday.

In July, former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO, accusing the organization of colluding with China to cover up the origins and handling of the coronavirus outbreak. China denied the allegations.

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White House Says Nothing to Announce About Potential Biden, Putin Call

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – The White House does not have anything to announce on a potential call between new US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters.

"I don't have any plans to read out for you in terms of a call with President Putin," Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

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Canada 'Disappointed' With Biden Decision to Scrap Approval For Keystone XL - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is "disappointed" at newly inaugurated US President Joe Biden's decision to scrap federal government approval to complete the Keystone XL pipeline, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement.

"Earlier today, Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States of America," Trudeau said on Wednesday evening. "While we welcome the President's commitment to fight climate change, we are disappointed but acknowledge the President's decision to fulfill his election campaign promise on Keystone XL.

The Keystone XL pipeline was designed to take crude oil 1,700 miles from Alberta in Canada to Steele City, Nebraska. From there it would join existing pipelines taking oil to refineries in Texas and Illinois.

The decision to block the controversial pipeline will come despite last minute lobbying by Justin Trudeau.

Canada has the third-largest oil reserves in the world and the Canadian Prime Minister wants the pipeline to appease the oil industry and to avoid the alternative, which is to transport oil

thousands of miles across Canada by train from the Athabasca tar sands in Alberta to the east coast.

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Russia Hopes New US Administration to Study Moscow's Idea for UN5 Summit - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia hopes that the new US administration will examine Moscow's proposal to hold a summit of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and expects it to be organized once the coronavirus threat has weakened, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We expect the new [US] administration to study Russia's idea carefully and to have the UN5 summit organized as soon as the situation with the epidemic permits," the ambassador said. In early 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested holding the summit. France and China welcomed the idea publicly, the US and the UK reportedly backed it, too.

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Russia Open for Dialogue on New START Extension With New US Administration - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia is open for substantive dialogue with the United States on the extension of New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) and believes that it is still possible for it to be prolonged, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

Biden's administration plans to engage with Russia "very quickly" on the treaty and wants to have an extension, his nominee for Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, said Tuesday during his a confirmation hearing.

"Russia is open for a substantive dialogue on the New START. There are still chances to reach this agreement before the treaty expires on February 5, 2021. The ball is in Washington's court, we are waiting for constructive proposals," Antonov said.

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US Senate Confirms New Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The US Senate has confirmed Avril Haines to be the new Director of National Intelligence (DNI).

The Senate voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday to confirm Haines as the Biden administration's DNI.

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Canada 'Disappointed' With Biden Decision to Scrap Approval For Keystone XL - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is "disappointed" at newly inaugurated US President Joe Biden's decision to scrap federal government approval to complete the Keystone XL pipeline, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement.

"Earlier today, Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th President of the United States of America," Trudeau said on Wednesday evening. "While we welcome the President's commitment to fight climate change, we are disappointed but acknowledge the President's decision to fulfill his election campaign promise on Keystone XL.

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Biden Revokes Permit for Keystone XL Pipeline - CBC

TORONTO, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has revoked the presidential permit for the Keystone XL oil pipeline extension project, Canadian state broadcaster CBC reported. Biden issued an executive order on Wednesday afternoon to dissolve the permit issued by former US President Donald Trump, the CBC reported.

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Biden Signs Executive Orders for US to Rejoin Paris Climate Accord, WHO

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has signed executive orders to rejoin the United States to the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization (WHO). "Third I'm gonna send while you're all here is the commitment I made that we're going to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord as of today," Biden said on Wednesday.

Former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO and the Paris Climate Accord during his time in office.

Biden also signed executive orders to halt the construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border and to terminate the so-called "Muslim travel ban" imposed by the Trump administration.

Trump had declared a national emergency on the southern border to divert funds for the construction of a border wall.

On January 2017, the Trump administration first introduced a ban prohibiting entry of foreign nationals from seven Muslim majority countries, although court challenges forced the administration to modify the ban multiple times.

Biden also signed an executive order mandating the US public to wear a face mask and practice social distancing on federal property.

Biden signed 17 executive orders overall to undo some of the Trump administration's policies, including to halt the Keystone XL pipeline and to revoke oil and gas development on federal wildlife lands.

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US Senator Graham Warns Republicans Not to 'Erase' Former President Trump

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Republican Party faces the prospect of a collapse if it attempts to move forward without former President Donald Trump given that the achievements during his presidency proved consequential for conservative voters, US Senator Lindsey Graham said in an interview with Fox News.

"If you're wanting to erase Donald Trump from the party, you're going to get erased. Most Republicans like his policies," Graham said on Wednesday evening. "A lot of people are disappointed with him personally at times but appreciate the outcomes he's achieved for our country."

Trump faces a constitutionally mandated Senate trial to determine guilt or innocence of charges in US House approved articles of impeachment for incitement of insurrection. A guilty verdict could bar Trump from holding public office, according to a widely held but untested interpretation of the Constitution.

Graham called Trump's impeachment unconstitutional, in part because the US House acted with no witnesses, no lawyers and by completing the process in less than 24 hours. He added that a Senate trial would continue to divide the nation.

Graham also said Trump's support will be needed if Republicans hope to regain control of the House and Senate in 2022 midterm elections.

In the longer term, for the Republican Party "to survive, we've got to realize that Donald Trump had a consequential presidency for conservatives, that he's going to be strongest voice in the party," Graham added.

Graham cited Trump's success winning confirmation for conservative judges, rebuilding the military, halting waves of illegal migrants crossing the southern US border and signing of peace agreements between several Arab nations and Israel - accomplishments dear to conservative voters.

Hours after his inauguration, Biden signed a series of executive orders overturning multiple Trump administration initiatives, such as withdrawing the United States from the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization.

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UN Chief Welcomes US Re-Engagement With World Health Organization - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed US President Joe Biden's decision to rejoin the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the United States' stated re-engagement with the World Health Organization," Dujarric said on Wednesday. "With vaccines being a critical tool in the battle against COVID-19, the United States joining and supporting the COVAX facility will give momentum to efforts to ensure equitable access to vaccines for all countries."

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UN Chief Says 'Warmly' Welcomes Biden's Decision to Rejoin Paris Climate Accord

UNITED NATIONS, January 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that he welcomes US President Joe Biden's decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Agreement and remains committed to cooperating to overcome the climate emergency and recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

Earlier on Wednesday, Biden signed three executive orders, including one on the United States rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement. The decision reverses former President Donald Trump's move to abandon the accord.

"I warmly welcome President Biden's steps to re-enter the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and join the growing coalition of governments, cities, states, businesses and people taking ambitious action to confront the climate crisis," Guterres said. "I am committed to working closely with President Biden and other leaders to overcome the climate emergency, and recover better from COVID19."

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Biden Said Trump Wrote Him 'Generous' Letter

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters that his predecessor Donald Trump left him a very generous letter, but refused to disclose its contents. "The President wrote a very generous letter... Because it was private, I won't talk about it until I talk to him. But it was generous," Biden said at the White House.

Trump, who never retracted allegations of the fraudulently stolen elections, skipped Biden's inauguration and left the White House for his Florida estate early in the morning.

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Biden Signs Executive Orders for US to Rejoin Paris Climate Accord, WHO

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has signed executive orders to rejoin the United States to the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization (WHO). "Third I'm gonna send while you're all here is the commitment I made that we're going to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord as of today," Biden said on Wednesday. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the WHO and the Paris Climate Accord during his time in office.

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Biden Signs Executive Orders to Halt Border Wall Construction, Terminate Muslim Travel Ban

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has signed executive orders to halt the construction of the wall on the US-Mexico border and to terminate the so-called "Muslim travel ban" imposed by the Trump administration. "I'm proud of today's executive actions," Biden said on Wednesday evening. "I'm going to start by keeping the promises I made to the American people." Trump had declared a national emergency on the southern border to divert funds for the construction of a border wall. On January 2017, the Trump administration first introduced a ban prohibiting entry of foreign nationals from seven Muslim majority countries, although court challenges forced the administration to modify the ban multiple times.

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New Vice President Harris Swears in Two Georgia Senators For New Democrat Majority

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris swore in two newly elected US senators from the state of Georgia and her own appointed successor from California less than five hours after taking the oath of office alongside President Joe Biden.

"The chair lays before the Senate two certificates of election from the state of Georgia and the resignation of former Senator Kamala D. Harris," the new Vice President said on Wednesday. Then she added, in reference to herself, "That was weird."

As the head of the Senate, Harris then administered the oath of office to the three new Democratic senators, the Rev. Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff - both elected from Georgia - and Harris's own successor, former California Secretary of State Alex Padilla, who was appointed by state Governor Gavin Newsom.

Since Warnock and Ossoff defeated two Republican incumbents their swearing in tips control of the upper chamber of Congress by a single vote from the Republicans to the Democrats and making Democratic caucus leader Senator Chuck Schumer of New York State the new Senate Majority Leader.

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Bank of Canada Governor Says Economy to Contract by 2.5% in First Quarter of 2021

TORONTO, January 20 (Sputnik) - A resurgent coronavirus pandemic in Canada will cause the country's economy to contract by 2.5 percent in the first quarter of 2021, Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem said in his prepared remarks while unveiling the latest Monetary Policy Report.

The Bank of Canada estimated that economic activity in the fourth quarter of 2020 rose by 5 percent but determined that a rise in new cases that has prompted various levels of government to either suspend reopening plans or enact new or stricter measures, will curtail the momentum in the next quarter.

"With higher infection rates and tighter restrictions, this positive momentum has been broken. Employment declined in December for the first time since April, and consumer spending looks to have pulled back. We are now projecting the economy to shrink by roughly 2.5 percent in the first quarter of 2021," Macklem said on Wednesday.

Should the restrictive measures be extended or strengthened, the first quarter decline could be steeper, Macklem added.

Despite the short-term setback, Canada's central bank projects that the country's economy will grow by 4 percent in 2021 and by 5 percent in 2022, after the 5.5 percent drop during the pandemic-riddled 2020.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Bank of Canada announced it has decided to maintain the target overnight rate at 0.25 percent as the economy labors through the novel coronavirus pandemic. In its announcement, the Bank of Canada also said it will continue its program of quantitative easing and purchasing weekly \$3-billion worth of government bonds.

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US Vice President Kamala Harris Walks Into White House for First Time in Her New Position

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Vice President Kamala Harris arrived at the White House after being sworn earlier in the day as the first woman and also the first woman of south Asian decent in that position.

When reporters asked her upon arrival what would be her first task on the job, Harris responded, "Walk into work."

The former California Senator left her motorcade and walked down on Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House amid heavy presence of security personnel. During the walk, Harris was holding hands with her husband, Second Gentlemen Doug Emhoff, and was accompanied by other family members.

The security of the US President Joe Biden's inauguration has been guaranteed by well over 25,000 National Guard troops, Secret Service and other federal law enforcement personnel as well as local police and police from nearby US states.

The authorities erected numerous metal fences and concrete obstacles throughout Washington, established tens of checkpoints, imposed a lockdown in the downtown area that encompassed the National Mall, and closed metro stations, roads and bridges..

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US Stocks Hit Record Highs as Biden Presidency Begins

NEW YORK, January 20 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street hit record highs on Wednesday as Joe Biden began his term as the 46th US president, promising to unite the country and restore its economy from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, Wall Street's broadest stocks gauge, settled the day at 31,1888, up 0.8 percent. It hit an all-time high at 31,236 earlier. The S&P 500, a barometer for the top 500 US stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, settled at 3,850, up 1.4 percent, after an all-time high of 3,860 earlier. The technology-laden Nasdaq index, which counts on the performance of tech stock giants such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google, was the outperformer of the day, finishing up 2 percent at 13,457. Its session peak was 13,486.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik)

BIDEN INAUGURATION

* US President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said his administration will confront and defeat white supremacy and domestic terrorism.

- * Biden said that his goal is to bring the American people together and called on the nation to end the ongoing uncivil war.

- * Biden said the United States can overcome the novel coronavirus pandemic and the United States will fix its alliances and engage with the world again.

- * Biden signed his first three documents in the Presidents Room at the Capitol after the inauguration ceremony.

TRUMP LEAVES WHITE HOUSE

- * President Donald Trump in his final address in office on Wednesday hailed his administration's creation of the Space Force as one of the greatest achievements of his presidency.

- * Trump wished the incoming Biden administration good luck and pledged to be back in some form.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * Russia has not yet had any contact with the new US administration but expects to start a substantial dialogue once Joe Biden is sworn in as president and his new administration starts work, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

- * Russia considers it expedient to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with the United States for the maximum stipulated five-year period, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

- * The Kremlin does not prepare for the inauguration of Biden, as it actually changes nothing for Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, reaffirming Moscow's commitment to seek better relations with Washington.

- * The nomination of former Ambassador to Russia William Burns to the post of CIA Director by the new US President Joe Biden is a positive signal for Russia, Alexis Rodzianko, the head of the American Chamber of Commerce in Russia (AmCham), told Sputnik.

- * Moscow welcomes the statements of candidate for the post of US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, about the possibility of extending the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said.

EXPLOSION IN MADRID

- * A powerful explosion seriously damaged a building in the center of Madrid, diario.es reported.

- * A suspected gas blast in central Madrid has left at least six people injured, Spanish television channel La Sexta cited a witness.

- * Residents of a retirement home located next to the blast-hit building in central Madrid have not been hurt and are being evacuated, media said.

- * Three people were killed and one went missing in a domestic gas explosion at a house in central Madrid, Spanish government spokesman for the Madrid community, Jose Manuel Franco, said.

MILITANTS ELIMINATED IN CHECHNYA

- * The Russian National Antiterrorism Committee said on Wednesday that five bandits were eliminated in a special operation in Russia's Chechen Republic.

* Militants from Ukraine were part of the gang led by Aslan Byutukaev, who was eliminated in Chechnya, the Russian National Antiterror Committee (NAC) said.

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Biden Arrives at White House After Inauguration as US President

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden arrived at the White House on Wednesday after being sworn in office earlier.

Biden arrived at the White House for the first time as US president after the inauguration ceremony held earlier in the day in Washington.

In his first address to the nation as president, Biden called for unity and an end to "uncivil war,," vowing to become a leader for all and re-engage with the world.

The festivities are being kept secure by some 25,000 National Guard soldiers, five times the combined number of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with multilayered fences, closures of metro stations, roads and bridges that put Washington, DC on a virtual lockdown

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UN Chief Sends Letter to President Biden Expressing Hope for Cooperation on Global Issues

UNITED NATIONS, January 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres sent a letter to Joe Biden, sworn in as US 46th President on Wednesday, expressing his hope for cooperation on a series of global challenges, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts earlier in the day.

"A letter is going out to President Biden expressing that he [Guterres] looks forward [to working] with President Biden and with Vice President [Kamala] Harris," Dujarric said. "The United States has a key leadership role to play across the international agenda, including in the Security Council, on matters of peace and security. We also look forward to working with the administration to advance sustainable development, human rights for all the world's people." Dujarric said that Guterres looks forward to cooperating with the members of Biden's Cabinet, particularly with US Secretary of State-designate, Antony Blinken, and the Permanent Representative-designate to the United Nations, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, once they are confirmed.

"It's going to be, I think, a very active and positive engagement between the Secretary-General and this new administration," the spokesman added.

Dujarric also welcomed the reports of the Executive Orders expected to be signed later on Wednesday, including on the United States re-joining the Paris climate accord and the World Health Organization.

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Biden Appoints Dan Smith as Acting Secretary to Temporarily Lead State Dept. - White House

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has appointed Dan Smith to temporarily serve as acting Secretary of State until nominee Antony Blinken is confirmed by the Senate, the White House said in a press release on Wednesday.

"Today, President Joe Biden announced the acting agency leadership across the administration to assist in the next phase... of the transition of government," the release said. "These individuals, nearly all of whom are career civil servants, will temporarily lead federal agencies while Cabinet nominees continue moving through the confirmation process."

Biden also appointed Andy Baukol as Acting Treasury Secretary and Monty Wilkinson as the Acting head of the Justice Department.

Biden appointed David Norquist to temporarily lead the Defense Department and David Pekoske to serve as acting Secretary of Homeland Security, among others.

Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States shortly before 12:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT). Biden signed an Inauguration Day Proclamation and nominations to Cabinet positions and sub-Cabinet positions in his first acts as president.

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US National Archives Launches Trump Presidential Library Website

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A newly created website hosting records of former President Donald Trump and his administration will catalogue items destined for the future Trump Presidential Library, the National Archives said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The Trump Library will be part of the National Archives' Presidential Libraries system, which, under the Presidential Libraries Act, established a system of privately constructed and federally maintained presidential libraries," the release said.

Regardless of whether Trump decides to supplement his library with a research facility and museum - a practice of past US presidents - the National Archives will maintain the collection of records from his administration, the release added.

The Trump library will be the fifteenth presidential library maintained by the National Archives, according to the release.

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Biden Arrives at White House After Inauguration as US President

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden arrived at the White House on Wednesday after being sworn in office earlier.

Biden arrived at the White House for the first time as US president after the inauguration ceremony held earlier in the day in Washington.

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Biden Lays Wreath at Tomb of Unknown Soldier in Arlington Cemetery

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Newly inaugurated President Joe Biden laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia in a tribute to the US armed forces two and a half hours after his inauguration on Wednesday.

Biden's family including his grandchildren, Vice President Kamala Harris and three former presidents who had attended his inauguration - Democrats Bill Clinton and Barack Obama and Republican George W. Bush, also attended the ceremony.

The streets of Washington and routes in Virginia, usually packed with crowds during a presidential inauguration were entirely deserted apart from armed police and troops because of the assault on the US Capitol on January 6 and because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has so far killed close to 400,000 people in the United States.

Biden earlier signed his first three documents as president, including new cabinet positions.

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Pentagon Blocks Biden's Team From Information on Current Operations - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon blocked members of US President Joseph Biden's team from obtaining information about current operations, Politico reported on Wednesday.

This information included details of US troops withdrawal from Afghanistan, future military missions in Africa, distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines and other programs, the newspaper said citing Biden's team and defense officials.

This situation is unprecedented, and will limit the new administration's ability to address key national security issues, these officials said.

Pentagon members often were canceling briefings with Biden's transition team or delayed them to the very last moment, the newspaper said. In particular, the Pentagon canceled the meeting with the commander of US forces in Afghanistan Gen. Scott Miller, the report said.

Transition officials accused the Trump team of delaying answers on operations related to COVID-19 vaccine distribution, hampering the new administration's plan to increase public access to vaccine over the next 100 days, it added.

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Biden Reviews Troops in Ceremony Reflecting Peaceful Change of Command Over US Military

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris and their respective spouses stood at attention during a ceremonial review of troops during inauguration ceremonies at the US Capitol on Wednesday, a tradition that symbolizes the installation of a new commander-in-chief.

Representatives of US military services followed by squad representing the 18th century Continental Army clad in red uniforms and three-corner hats paraded in the ceremony known as the "Pass in Review."

The traditional inaugural event represents the first salute by service members to the newly sworn commander-in-chief, according to the Defense Department.

After the review, Biden, Harris and their spouses visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery.

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Biden Signs First Three Documents as US 46th President

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed his first three documents in the Presidents Room at the Capitol after the inauguration ceremony on Wednesday.

After being sworn in as the 46th president of the United States shortly before 12:00 p.m. EST (5:00 p.m. GMT) Biden signed an Inauguration Day Proclamation and nominations to Cabinet positions and sub-Cabinet positions.

The signing ceremony followed a first promenade around Capitol Hill by Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

Biden won the 2020 US presidential election held on November 3 and denied former President Donald Trump second term in the White House.

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Connecticut Man Charged With Attacking Officer During US Capitol Breach - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The US government has charged a man from the state of Connecticut with attacking an officer guarding the US Capitol during the January 6 breach, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"A Connecticut man was charged yesterday in the US District Court for the District of Columbia with assaulting an officer during the breach of the US Capitol grounds on January 6, 2021," the release said. "He will be presented in US District Court for the Southern District of New York [later on Wednesday], before appearing in Washington DC."

Patrick Edward McCaughey III was charged with assaulting, resisting, or impeding certain officers or employees, and with entering a restricted building or grounds and with violent entry or disorderly conduct, the Justice Department said.

"The vicious attack on Officer Hodges was abhorrent and quintessentially un-American. It is my pledge that anyone involved in violent attacks on law enforcement at the US Capitol on January 6, will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," Acting US Attorney Michael Sherwin said in the release.

As alleged in the charging documents, a video posted to YouTube showed an individual subsequently identified as McCaughey seen using a clear police riot shield to physically push against the left side of an officer's body. The officer was pinned between the clear police riot shield being held by McCaughey and the lower west terrace door.

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Biden Inaugurated as US President, Appeals for Unity

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden took office as the 46th US President calling for unity and an end to an "uncivil war," vowing to become a leader for all and re-engage with the world in the most guarded and one of the least attended inauguration ceremonies in the country's history.

The 78-year-old Democratic Party veteran was sworn in on the steps of the Capitol building with his hand atop of a 127-year-old, five-inch-thick family Bible, and his wife Jill and son Hunter standing by his side. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts administered the presidential part of the ceremony that was shortly preceded by Kamala Harris's oath as the first ever female Vice-President.

"Today on this January day, my whole soul is in this: bringing America together, uniting our people, uniting our nation, and I ask every American to join me in this cause," Biden said in his 21-minute inaugural address.

The festivities are being kept secure by some 25,000 National Guard soldiers, five times the combined number of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with multilayered fences, closures of metro stations, roads and bridges that put Washington, DC on a virtual lockdown.

The largest peace-time military deployment in the capital followed an attack on the domed residence of US Congress by former President Donald Trump's loyalists on January 6, who sought to prevent the certification of Biden's electoral win.

"We have learned again that democracy is precious, democracy is fragile. And at this hour, my friends, democracy has prevailed," Biden said.

He promised to defeat "political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism," but called for an end to "this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal."

"I will be a president for all Americans... I will fight as hard for those who did not support me as those who did," Biden vowed.

To the rest of the world he promised to fix America's alliances and lead "not merely by the example of our power, but by the power of our example."

"We will... engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges but today's and tomorrow's challenges," Biden said.

He briefly paused the speech for a silent prayer in memory of over 400,000 Americans killed by the coronavirus pandemic. Biden thanked "predecessors of both parties," Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who attended his inauguration and "saluted" 96-year-old Jimmy Carter. The oldest living former US President did not come, but sent his "best wishes." Trump, who never retracted allegations that the election was stolen, became the first outgoing president to skip an inauguration since 1879 when Andrew Johnson did not attend Ulysses Grant's swearing in.

Trump left the White House early in the morning and headed for his Florida estate after a farewell ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base.

"Good bye. We love you. We will be back in some form," he said. "Have a good life. We will see you soon."

Trump still faces a trial at the Senate after the House of Representatives voted for his impeachment over "an incitement of violence against the US government" in January 6 events. Amid security concerns and pandemic restrictions only 1,000 guests are estimated to turn out for inauguration, a far cry from some 200,000 who would normally celebrate an inauguration in person. Organizers honored those absent by planting 191,500 US flags on the National Mall, a usual rally point for crowds of spectators.

Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik Russia has not yet had any contact with the new US administration but expects to start a "substantial" dialogue as new

people start their jobs. The ambassador added that Russian diplomats were familiar with many of Biden's nominees for top jobs, as they had worked in the US administration in the past. Lady Gaga performed the national anthem at the inauguration while Jennifer Lopez sang "America The Beautiful" and shouted something jubilantly in Spanish.

"It's the first inauguration where J.Lo is a warm-up act for Chief Justice," Senator Amy Klobuchar, the main speaker at the ceremony, said.

In his first tweet as US President Biden promised "to get right to work" from day one. He is expected to sign 17 executive orders that will undo some of the Trump administration's policies, such as halting construction of the border wall, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, halting the Keystone XL pipeline project, and terminating the so-called Muslim travel ban.

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Trudeau Says Looks Forward to Working with Biden on COVID-19 Response, Recovery

TORONTO, January 20 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement on Wednesday that he looks forward to working with the newly minted Biden administration on a host of issues including the COVID-19 pandemic response and recovery.

Joe Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts earlier in the day.

"I look forward to working with President Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, their administration," Trudeau said. "Canada and the United States have worked side-by-side to tackle some of the greatest challenges we have faced in our history. We will continue this partnership as we fight the global COVID-19 pandemic and support a sustainable economic recovery that will build back better for everyone."

Trudeau added that among shared priorities is tackling climate change, promoting inclusion and diversity, and sponsoring democracy, peace and security domestically and globally.

While it is expected that Trudeau is expected to enjoy more cordial relations with Biden, following a tumultuous four-year relationship with outgoing President Donald Trump, Ottawa and Washington are locked in a number of trade disputes, namely US tariffs on Canadian lumber and dairy exports.

Biden is also expected to revoke the presidential permit for the construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline extension in one of his first acts as president, a project favored by Trudeau.

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Biden After Inauguration Says Heading to Oval Office to Deliver 'Bold Action'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden after his inauguration on Wednesday said he is heading to the Oval office to deliver bold action.

"There is no time to waste when it comes to tackling the crises we face. That's why today, I am heading to the Oval Office to get right to work delivering bold action and immediate relief for American families," Biden said via Twitter.

Biden is expected to sign 17 executive orders that will undo some of the Trump administration's policies, such as halting construction of the border wall, rejoining the Paris Climate Agreement and World Health Organization, halting the Keystone XL pipeline project, and terminating the so-called Muslim travel ban.

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Canada's TC Energy Halts Construction of Keystone XL Ahead of Expected Biden Cancellation

TORONTO, January 20 (Sputnik) - Construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline extension is being halted ahead of US President Joe Biden's expected decision to revoke the existing presidential permit, the pipeline's parent company, TC Energy, said in a statement on Wednesday.

Biden's list of tasks for Inauguration Day on January 20 includes signing an executive order to rescind the Keystone XL construction permit granted in 2019 by outgoing President Donald Trump, according to documents obtained by the Canadian Press on Sunday.

"As a result of the expected revocation of the Presidential Permit, advancement of the project will be suspended. The company will cease capitalizing costs, including interest during construction, effective January 20, 2021," the statement said.

TC Energy - formerly the TransCanada Corporation - said it is disappointed by Biden's decision and added that it will be modifying its financing plans going forward.

The Canadian government is expected to contest the decision, with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, a supporter of the project, telling reporters on Tuesday that his government will lobby the "highest levels" of the incoming Biden administration in a bid to salvage the pipeline extension project.

The leaders of Canada's two left-leaning parties - the New Democrats and Greens - welcomed the news and lauded Biden for tackling what they say is an acute climate crisis.

The Keystone is an oil pipeline system that moves Alberta crude oil from the Canadian town of Hardisty to refineries and tank farms in the US states of Illinois, Oklahoma and Texas. The first three phases of the system are currently operational, however, the construction of the fourth phase, better known as Keystone XL, which is planned to transport oil to the US state of Nebraska, has caused a major uproar on both sides of the border.

The proposed section of the pipeline was twice rejected by the Obama administration, but was backed by Trump, who is set to leave office tomorrow.

In September, the US Supreme Court rejected a request from the Trump administration and TC Energy to dismiss a lower court ruling blocking further construction of the pipeline because of a violation related to a water-crossing permit.

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Biden Says US Will Repair Alliances, Engage World Once Again

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said that the United States will fix its alliances and engage with the world again.

"We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges but today's and tomorrow's challenges," Biden said. "And we'll lead not merely by the example of our power, but by the power of our example."

Biden also pledged to be a strong and trusted partner for peace, progress and security.

Right Before the speech, Biden was sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts.

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Russia Expects to Start Dialogue With New US Gov't After Biden Takes Office - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russia has not yet had any contact with the new US administration but expects to start a substantial dialogue once Joe Biden is sworn in as president and his new administration starts work, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov told Sputnik.

"We did not have such [preliminary] contacts," Antonov said when asked if there were any meetings with Biden's appointees.

The ambassador added that Russian diplomats were familiar with many of Biden's nominees for top jobs, as they had worked in the US administration in the past.

"We expect to start a substantial dialogue with our colleagues on pressing bilateral and international issues as new people take jobs at the White House, State Department, and other departments," Antonov said.

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US Indicts MIT Professor for Failing to Report \$29M In From China - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The US indicted a Chinese-American engineering professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for failing to report payments from China for technical advice, the Justice Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

"[Gang] Chen is a naturalized US citizen who was born in China. He is a professor and researcher at MIT where he serves as Director of the MIT Pappalardo Micro/Nano Engineering Laboratory and Director of the Solid-State Solar Thermal Energy Conversion Center (S3TEC),"

the release said. "Since 2013, Chen allegedly received approximately \$29 million of foreign funding, including \$19 million from the PRC's [People's Republic of China's] Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech)."

Since 2013, Chen's research at MIT has been funded by nearly \$19 million in grants awarded by various US federal agencies.

The indictment includes two counts of wire fraud, one count of failing to file a foreign bank account report and one count of making a false statement in a tax return, according to the release.

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Biden Says US Will Repair Alliances, Engage World Once Again

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said that the United States will fix its alliances and engage with the world again. "We will repair our alliances and engage with the world once again, not to meet yesterday's challenges but today's and tomorrow's challenges," Biden said. "And we'll lead not merely by the example of our power, but [by] the power of our example."

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David Norquist Takes Over as Acting US Secretary of Defense - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist has taken over as acting secretary of defense, the Pentagon announced in a statement on Wednesday immediately after the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

"At 12:01 p.m., Jan. 20, David L. Norquist assumed the duties of Acting Secretary of Defense," the statement said. "In his capacity as acting secretary, Norquist will maintain continuity and readiness of the Department until a defense secretary is confirmed."

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Biden in Inauguration Speech Says US Can Overcome COVID-19 Pandemic

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said the United States can overcome the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"We can overcome the deadly virus," Biden said.

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Biden Says US Must End This 'Uncivil War'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his inauguration address on Wednesday called on the nation to end the ongoing uncivil war.

"We must end this uncivil war that pits red against blue, rural versus urban, conservative versus liberal. We can do this," Biden said.

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Biden Vows to Bring America Together, Make US 'Leading Force in World'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said that his goal is to bring the American people together.

Biden said he is focused on "bringing America together," uniting the country and called on everyone to join him. Americans can make their country "again the leading force in the world," he added.

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Biden Vows to Defeat White Supremacy, Domestic Terrorism

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his inauguration speech on Wednesday said his administration will confront and defeat white supremacy and domestic terrorism.

"Now, the rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat," Biden said after being sworn in as the 46th president of the United States.

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Trump Arrives at Mar-a-Lago Residence in Florida Shortly Before Biden Inauguration

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump returned to his Florida home at Mar-a-Lago, just half an hour before his successor, Joe Biden, was sworn in as the 46th US President in Washington, DC, a White House pool report said.

Pool vans peeled off the presidential motorcade as it pulled into Mar-a-Lago at 11:31 a.m. with 29 minutes of Trump's presidency remaining, the report said.

There was no crowd or greeters at the airport, but supporters had gathered at key points along the route at places in dozens.

The pro-Trump crowd stretched a couple of miles before the bridge on to Palm Beach Island, two or three deep in places. "We love you 45," and "Support our Police" were among signs displayed along the route, the pool report said.

Some supporters had Trump-Pence 2020 flags and many wore red Make America Great Again (MAGA) hats. One woman was crying as she held aloft a "We are not fake news." Some dissenters carried a sign saying: "Firefighters for Biden," the pool report added.

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Biden Becomes 46th US President

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden has taken oath on Wednesday and became 46th president of the United States.

Biden was sworn in by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts.

Former US President Donald Trump has left for his Mar-a-Lago golf club in Palm Beach on Wednesday morning and became the first president skipping his successor's inauguration since 1879 when Andrew Johnson did not attend ceremony for Ulysses S. Grant.

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Harris Sworn in as US Vice President

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Kamala Harris has taken oath on Wednesday to serve as next vice president of the United States.

Harris was sworn in at the Capitol by Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina member of the Supreme Court.

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Outgoing US President Trump Lifts Tariffs on UAE Aluminum Imports From Feb. 3 - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has decided to lift tariffs on aluminum imports from the United Arab Emirates after determining they are not detrimental to US national security, outgoing president Donald Trump said in a statement on Wednesday.

"I have determined that aluminum article imports from the United Arab Emirates will no longer threaten to impair the national security and have decided to exclude the United Arab Emirates from the tariff proclaimed in Proclamation 9704," Trump said in the statement issued by the office of his press secretary.

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Antiwar Coalition Cancels Inauguration Rally, Calls Issued Permit 'Mirage of Free Speech'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The advocacy group Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (ANSWER) has canceled its planned rally on Inauguration Day because it sees the granting of its permit to gather as an attempt to maintain a mirage of free speech, ANSWER Director Brian Becker told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"We canceled it because no one was going to be able to get to the site because the area is entirely fortified and the public is not allowed to enter that area and the media could not get to that area either," Becker said. "So there was no point for the ANSWER Coalition to hold an activity that was guaranteed to be invisible. The First Amendment was effectively stifled but the government issued a permit for our activity to maintain the 'image' or mirage of free speech at the inauguration."

The ANSWER coalition was one of two groups that received permits from the authorities to hold rallies on Wednesday.

National Mall and Memorial Parks Superintendent Jeffrey Reinbold told reporters last week that the authorities will permit two small and heavily guarded rallies on Inauguration Day in downtown Washington, DC, which has been placed on a lockdown for the event.

Reinbold said activists will be escorted through magnetometers and then taken to permitted areas and backed by US Park Police, who will also accompany them throughout the event.

The US capital has implemented unprecedented security measures leading up to President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, effectively closing the city to the public and calling in more than 25,000 National Guard troops to ensure security during the event in addition to local and federal law enforcement personnel.

Biden is set to be sworn in by US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts on Wednesday at around noon local time (17:00 GMT).

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US Supreme Court Receives Bomb Threat, Building Not Being Evacuated - Statement

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – The US Supreme Court received a bomb threat, but the building is not being evacuated and the grounds of the building have been checked, a spokesperson for the court said in a statement.

"The Court received a bomb threat, the building and grounds were checked out, and the building is not being evacuated," the statement read.

The US Supreme Court is located in a building near the Capitol, where President-elect Joseph Biden's inauguration ceremony is currently taking place.

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Biden Arrives at US Capitol for Inauguration Ceremony

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden arrived at the US Capitol on Wednesday for a ceremony that will see him inaugurated as the 46th president of the United States.

Biden will be sworn in at around noon by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts, before delivering his first address to the nation as president.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris has also arrived at the Capitol for the inauguration ceremony.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Overnight Rate at 0.25% - Statement

TORONTO, January 20 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada said in a statement on Wednesday that it has decided to maintain the target overnight rate at 0.25 percent as the economy labors through the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at the effective lower bound of 0.25 percent, with the Bank Rate at 0.5 percent and the deposit rate at 0.25 percent," the statement said.

The Bank of Canada also said it will continue its program of quantitative easing and purchasing weekly \$3-billion worth of government bonds.

Canada's central bank said that the interest rate will remain at its effective lower bound until the 2 percent inflation target is met and sustained, which, according to the bank, is not projected to happen until 2023.

The next overnight rate announcement is due on March 10.

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Pence Arrives at US Capitol for Biden's Inauguration

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Mike Pence arrived to the US Capitol building on Wednesday to attend President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony. Biden is set to be sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts at around noon local time (17:00 GMT). President Donald Trump left Washington earlier in the day, becoming the first head of state to skip his successor's inauguration since 1879, when Andrew Johnson did not attend ceremony for Ulysses S. Grant

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UN Agency Reports 43 Deaths in First Refugee Shipwreck Off Libya This Year

UNITED NATIONS, January 20 (Sputnik) - A shipwreck off the Libyan coast claimed the lives of 43 refugees, UN refugee organizations said in a joint press release on Wednesday.

"The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, are deeply saddened by a tragic shipwreck off the Libyan coast yesterday (19/01), the first of 2021 in the Central Mediterranean, which claimed the lives of at least 43 people," the release said.

Ten survivors were rescued by Libyan security officials and taken to the coastal city of Zwara, where the UN provided food, water and medical screenings, the release said.

The boat reportedly capsized due to bad weather conditions just a few hours after departure, the release said.

The survivors, including from Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Ghana and Gambia, reported that those who died were all men from West African countries, the release said.

Hundreds of African refugees died last year while attempting to cross the Central Mediterranean from Libya to Europe.

The release recommended restoring state-led efforts to supplement private aid groups that monitor the dangerous migration route.

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Biden Ahead of Inauguration Says 'It's a New Day in America'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – US President-elect Joseph Biden said ahead of his inauguration on Wednesday that America was waking up to "a new day."

"It's a new day in America," Biden said via Twitter.

Biden is set to be sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts on Wednesday at around noon local time (17:00 GMT). Some 25,000 National Guard troops have been mobilized as part of enhanced security measures for the inauguration.

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Biden Attends Mass with Republican, Democratic Congress Leaders Ahead of Inauguration

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden attended Mass with Republican and Democratic congressional leaders in Washington on Wednesday, just hours ahead of his inauguration as the 46th president of the United States.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy joined Biden for the ceremony at the St. Matthews Cathedral in the capital.

Biden is set to be sworn in by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts on Wednesday at around noon local time (17:00 GMT). Some 25,000 National Guard troops have been mobilized as part of enhanced security measures for the inauguration.

Outgoing US President Donald Trump has left Washington for his Mar-a-Lago golf club in Palm Beach, becoming the first president to skip his successor's inauguration since 1879, when Andrew Johnson did not attend the ceremony for Ulysses S Grant.

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Trump Wishes Next Administration Luck, Says 'We Will Be Back in Some Form'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US President Donald Trump in his final address in office on Wednesday wished the incoming administration good luck and pledged to be back in some form.

"I wish the new administration great luck and great success. I think they'll have great success, they have the foundation to do something, really spectacular," Trump said. "So, just a good bye. We love you. We will be back in some form ... Have a good life, we will see you soon."

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Trump Says Creating Space Force One of Major Achievements of His Administration

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US President Donald Trump in his final address in office on Wednesday hailed his administration's creation of the Space Force as one of the greatest achievements of his presidency.

"What we've done has been amazing by any standard. We rebuilt the United States military, we created a new force, called the Space Force - that in itself would be a major achievement for a regular administration. We were not a regular administration," Trump said.

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FACTBOX - Life After The White House: A Look at Lives of Former US Presidents in Retirement

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - 45th US President Donald Trump left the White House on Wednesday, just hours ahead of President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration.

Below is a short biographic note of former US presidents' retirements.

Jimmy Carter (in office from 1977-1981): moved to longtime home in state of Georgia. Founded and funded Carter Center to promote and expand human rights. Works with Habitat for Humanity home-building charity. Teaches in Sunday school at a local church. Won 2002 Nobel Peace Prize for finding "peaceful solutions to international conflicts."

Ronald Reagan (from 1981-1989): quiet retirement. Worked on memoirs and set up presidential library in state of California. Diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease diagnosis in 1994. Died 10 years later on June 5, 2004. Remains voice of American conservatism after death.

George HW Bush (from 1989-1993): moved to Texas where he was active in humanitarian activities. Served on boards of several local charities. Volunteered at local church, spent time fishing. Alternated his time between staying in Houston and Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine. Died in November 2018 at age 94.

Bill Clinton (from 1993-2001): remained active in politics after moving to Chappaqua, New York, with his wife, then-Senator Hillary Clinton. Founded the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation and Clinton Global Initiative devoted to humanitarian work. Known for multiple speaking engagements. Dealt with multiple health issues requiring bypass surgery and coronary stents.

George W. Bush (from 2001-2009): returned to home in Texas. Took up painting as hobby. Studiously avoids politics while actively engaging in charity work. Hosts annual 100 kilometer (62mi) mountain bike ride to fundraise for wounded veterans. Wrote two books, including biography of father.

Barack Obama (from 2009- 2017): moved with family to home purchased in upscale Washington, DC neighborhood. Avoided politics until the run-up to the 2020 elections, when he started campaigning for President-elect Joe Biden, who served as his vice president. Delivered stinging rebuke of Trump administration at Democratic National Convention. He is an avid reader and writer of memoirs.

Donald Trump (from 2017-2021): expected to move to his Mar-a-Lago private club and residence with his wife. Says wants to run for president again in 2024. May launch a new political party to sidestep the Republicans. New-found free time may be devoted to playing golf, his life-long hobby.

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Trump Addresses Supporters at Farewell Ceremony at Joint Base Andrews

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Outgoing US President Donald Trump thanked his supporters during a farewell ceremony at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland on Wednesday, as he broke with the long-standing American tradition of attending his successor's inauguration.

"We love you, I can tell you from the bottom of my heart," Trump said.

Trump is the first president to skip his successor's inauguration since 1879, when Andrew Johnson did not attend ceremony for Ulysses S. Grant. Biden will be sworn in as 46th president of the United States by Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts at noon local time on Wednesday.

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Trump Leaves White House Ahead of Biden's Inauguration

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump left the White House early on Wednesday for the last time during his four-year term in office, just hours ahead of President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration.

"Goodbye... but hopefully not a long-term goodbye," Trump told reporters as he exited the White House for the last time of his presidency.

Trump and First Lady Melania walked out onto the White House lawn shortly after 8:10 a.m. local time and boarded Marine One for the first leg of their journey to their new residence at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Florida.

The couple are breaking with long-standing US tradition by skipping Biden's inauguration, and instead plan to attend a farewell ceremony later this morning at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland before departing to Florida.

Biden is due to be sworn in as president in a ceremony at the Capitol at noon, local time.

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RPT: REVIEW - Biden Top Cabinet Picks Commit to Continue Many of Trump's Hardline Policies

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President-elect Joe Biden's nominees to lead the State Department and the Pentagon during senate confirmation hearings committed to continue many of the hardline policies of the Trump administration - including those related to Russia, Venezuela, and China - although they appeared willing to cooperate with Moscow in areas like arms control.

A day before Biden is inaugurated, his top cabinet nominees were grilled for hours during separate senate confirmation hearings. Antony Blinken, Biden's secretary of state nominee, during his previous role with the State Department in the Obama era, supported the invasion of Libya and the arming of Syrian opposition. Biden's pick for defense department chief, Lloyd Austin, is a former general who headed Central Command (CENTCOM) during the Obama administration.

RUSSIA 'HIGH ON AGENDA'

Both nominees underscored that Russia would be a central concern of the Biden administration's foreign and national security policies.

"The challenge posed by Russia across a whole series of fronts is also one that is urgent," Blinken said during testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations committee on Tuesday. "This is very high on the agenda for the incoming administration."

Austin during his hearing also struck a tough tone with Moscow, saying the US must hold the Russians accountable if they are responsible for the recent widespread cyber attacks.

In addition, Blinken and Austin both signaled that they support providing Ukraine with lethal weapons. The US 2021 defense budget allocates \$250 million for overall military assistance to Ukraine, including \$75 million in lethal weaponry.

"I support the provision of lethal assistance to ensure Ukraine has the equipment it needs to defend itself," Austin said in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Regarding overseas operations, Austin said he will review the US force posture across the Middle East to ensure it is properly balanced to address a range of challenges including from Russia and China.

Blinken said he would try to persuade allies to stop the completion of the Nord Stream 2 project. Earlier in the day, the US sanctioned Russian pipe-laying vessel Fortuna and its owner KVT-Rus for building the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline route. Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said the sanctions violate international law and represent a US attempt to create an advantage in the European energy market.

Blinken signaled that the Biden administration would take a similar approach towards Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system. He warned that Ankara's "unacceptable" move might require tougher measures to prevent defense cooperation between Russia and Turkey.

The top diplomat nominee said the Biden administration would favor offering Georgia membership in NATO to boost deterrence against Russia.

The nominees had a couple positive suggestions regarding relations with Russia. Blinken said Biden will seek to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) before it expires on February 5. Austin, for his part, said extending the treaty was in the US national interest.

"It is also something that we have to engage very, very quickly because the deadline is very fast upon us," Blinken said. "We will seek the extension... the President-elect has to decide on a duration."

Austin mentioned the United States may cooperate with Russia in the Arctic, but expressed concern about a military build-up in the region.

OTHER DIPLOMATIC, SECURITY PRIORITIES

With respect to Tehran, Biden's pick for top diplomat said the United States will reciprocate in kind to Iran's resumed compliance with the nuclear deal, but would seek a broader agreement to cover issues like its missile program and alleged malign activities.

Blinken said Biden will follow the same path as the Trump administration with respect to the situation in Venezuela, including supporting Juan Guaido as president. Blinken said he also agreed with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's determination that China committed genocide against the Uighurs – a charge Beijing has strongly denied.

The top diplomat nominee said the Biden administration would not alter course on Israel. When asked, Blinken said he agreed that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and the United States would not relocate the embassy back to Tel Aviv.

However, Blinken suggested that the Biden administration might depart from Trump's line on North Korea. US President Donald Trump opened up historic nuclear talks with Pyongyang. The negotiations saw a promising start before fizzling by the end of Trump's term.

"I think we have to review and we intend to review the entire approach and policy toward North Korea because this is a hard problem that has plagued administration after administration, and it is a problem that has not gotten better. In fact, it has gotten worse," Blinken said.

Although Austin signaled that he agreed with extending New START, he also promised to accelerate efforts to build advanced weapons systems.

"If confirmed, I would encourage efforts to address the full spectrum of missile threats, including the continued development of integrated air and missile defense architectures for both regional and homeland defense, as well as the accelerated development of intercept capability for hypersonic missile defense," Austin said.

Austin, in addition, said he would commit to making sure Taiwan had enough support to defend itself and that he would examine Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Germany.

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RPT: PREVIEW - New US President Takes Office Amid Unprecedented Security, COVID-19 Lockdown

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Joe Biden will be sworn into office on Wednesday as the 46th US President in the most guarded and one of the least attended inauguration ceremonies in the country's history, as a result of ongoing healthcare and political emergencies that are poised to top the new administration's agenda from day one.

The festivities at the west front of the Capitol building will be kept secure by some 25,000 National Guard soldiers, five times the combined number of American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with multilayered fences, closures of metro stations, roads and bridges that put Washington, DC on a virtual lockdown.

The largest peace-time military deployment in the capital followed an attack on the domed residence of US Congress by incumbent Donald Trump's loyalists on January 6, who sought to prevent the certification of Biden's electoral win.

Biden is to take the oath of office at around noon local time (17:00 GMT) with his hand on top of a 127-year-old family Bible, which will be held by his wife Jill, media reported. Chief Justice John Roberts will administer the presidential part of the ceremony, while Vice President-elect Kamala Harris is expected to be sworn in by Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina member of the Supreme Court.

Biden is then expected to appeal for unity during his first presidential address to the nation.

"A message of unity [and] getting things done. That's what he will be talking about January 20," incoming White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain told CNN on Sunday.

Together with Harris, he will take part in a Pass in Review, wherein representatives of every branch of the military greet their new Commander-in-Chief.

The president and vice president are then scheduled to pay a visit to Arlington National Cemetery to lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. From there they will head to the White House, accompanied by the First Lady and Second Gentleman, an official title chosen by Harris's husband Doug Emhoff.

A virtual "Parade Across America" with performances from all 50 US states and five inhabited territories is expected to wrap up inauguration events.

Festivities will be attended by most of members of Congress, the Supreme Court and former presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. According to NBC, 96-year-old Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn Carter will not come, but "they sent their best wishes."

Foreign diplomats were also invited, including Russia's ambassador Anatoly Antonov, who told Sputnik that he plans to attend.

Vice President Mike Pence will be the most senior official to represent the outgoing administration at Biden's inauguration. President Donald Trump, who never retracted allegations of fraudulently stolen elections, announced that he would skip the event.

The incumbent is expected to leave the White House early on Wednesday morning and head for his Florida estate after a farewell ceremony at Andrews Air Force Base. Trump still faces a trial at the Senate after the House of Representatives voted for his impeachment over "an incitement of violence against the US government" in January 6 events.

On his first day in office, Biden will sign executive orders that overturn some of Trump's most controversial policies and reinforce pandemic mitigation and relief measures. He is expected to rejoin the Paris climate agreement, end restrictions on travel and immigration from a dozen Muslim countries, and issue a mask mandate on federal property.

The authorities permitted two small "First Amendment" events during the inauguration with activists to be searched and escorted to designated spots on Pennsylvania Avenue. Due to fears of "a coordinated insider attack" all National Guard servicemen deployed in the city are being vetted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, media reported. US law enforcement agencies warned of new flare-ups of violence across the country, but these fears have not been borne out yet.